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Architectural Heritage of Yemen

Buildings that Fill my Eye

Edited by

Trevor H.J. Marchand



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Figure 1. The remains of the minaret of the Mosque of Sayyida Zaynab, Mocha.

Mocha: Maritime Architecture on Yemen's Red Sea Coast

NANCY UM

If Yemen's stunning architectural heritage could be summed up in a single picture, it would likely be a view of either the mud-brick city of Shibam with its soaring skyscrapers or the Old City of Sanaa with its lofty brick-built façades laced with gypsum designs. Indeed, Yemen's built heritage is often encapsulated in towering elevations constructed in stone, brick or mud, all of which are inland traditions that are the topic of many essays in this volume (see, for example, the chapters by Jerome, Leiermann, Mackintosh-Smith, Marchand, Varanda and Weir).

By contrast, the architecture of Yemen's Red Sea ports, generally low-lying in stature, has taken a back-seat to these remarkable traditions that aim for verticality. Visitors to the most important cities of the Red Sea coast will find ruins and rubble rather than intact buildings that attest to the ingenuity of local design (see Figures 1 and 2). Mocha (or al-Mukha), al-Hudaydah and al-Luhayyah, for example, are marked primarily by their poor states of preservation, subject to the harsh and deleterious conditions of their seaside location.¹ Moreover, Yemen's coastal regions have frequently been associated with faraway sites on other coasts, such as those of India and East Africa. As such, students of vernacular architecture with interest in indigenous traditions may find it difficult to characterise these hybrid buildings with their visible but often unverifiable connections to distant external locations. These two aspects of coastal architecture – its poor state of preservation and its implicit foreignness – constitute two of the prevalent themes of Mocha's architectural history.

The city of Mocha provides important avenues for thinking about maritime architecture, particularly because it has been subject to relatively extensive documentation. Numerous records, both visual and textual, help us to understand the buildings that remain and also, to a certain extent, those that have been lost. In this

investigation, the notion of 'maritimity' hinges upon an active engagement with the seas and those locations that were accessible by it, rather than being a casual by-product of geographic location.² Architecture is one way for us to understand Mocha's strong ties to a sea-based world.

MOCHA: THE RISE AND FALL OF AN INTERNATIONAL PORT

Mocha's maritime history begins with the arrival of the Ottomans in 1538. Before then, this town had been no more than a small village, home to local fisherman and the shrine of its patron saint 'Ali bin 'Umar al-Shadhili. It was the Ottomans who developed the port for their navy and to facilitate overseas trade, during a time when they held control over the wider Red Sea arena. Mocha was also the first port of call to the north of Bab al-Mandab (the opening connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden) and thus a convenient stopping point for northbound and westbound ships,



Figure 2. Bayt 'Abd al-Haqq, Mocha.

namely from India and the Gulf, taking pilgrims to Mecca. Even if they lack the classic stylistic trademarks of imperial building, many of the public monuments that formed Mocha's essential urban structure were built under Ottoman patronage. For instance, the Tomb of al-Shadhili, which was originally established around the time of the saint's death in the early fifteenth century, was greatly expanded in 1590–91 at the order of the Ottoman governor of Yemen, Hasan Pasha.³ The same governor also supplanted the central role of the long-standing Great Mosque of Mocha by building the multi-domed Mosque of al-Shadhili adjacent to the newly refurbished tomb (see Figure 3).⁴ Today, the two structures named for Mocha's patron saint still stand in the centre of the city as enduring testaments to the Ottoman underpinnings of this international port. Other civic structures built in the Ottoman era, such as the customs house, prison, *wikala* (caravanserai), and the encircling walls and its gates are no longer extant.

It was also during the first period of Ottoman rule that Europeans began to appear at the port of Mocha. In 1609, the first English ship docked at Mocha, followed by the Dutch in 1616. Although the English and Dutch continued to visit the port throughout the seventeenth century, their presence was sporadic and their trade was encumbered by the political upheavals that destabilised Yemen at that time. The French did not seek direct access to Yemen until 1709. The eighteenth century witnessed the sustained residence of the merchants associated with these three nations in Mocha, a presence which is central to our understanding of this port's history, its functions and, in many ways, its identity.

Because of the copious records left by European visitors, Mocha's history can be traced with considerable continuity and a level of detail that is simply absent for other provincial sites in Yemen. The source material is comprised mainly of trade records and



Figure 3. The late sixteenth-century Mosque of al-Shadhili in Mocha, with the modern addition visible in the foreground.

travel accounts, but also includes drawings, prints, photographs and paintings. Scholars must use these sources carefully, however, with an understanding of the delimited perspectives that they represent. If not, we risk casting Mocha as a European port, when in fact it hosted a thriving community of local merchants in addition to those from India and the Gulf.

The Ottoman period ended in 1636 when the Qasimi imams ousted them from Yemen and founded a new state that unified the coastal lowlands with the traditional Zaydi highlands and which, for a time, included Hadhramaut. The Qasimi imams continued to use Mocha as Yemen's main outlet of trade, while the European presence increased at the port due to the expanding global interest in Yemen's main export, coffee. Mocha's pre-eminence as an international port endured into the nineteenth century, when its role was largely eclipsed by Aden, which witnessed resurgence with British control in 1839 (see Simpson, p. 205–13). The Ottomans returned to the Red Sea coast of Yemen in 1849 for a second period of control, which continued into the following century.

TRACES OF A VANISHING TRADITION

Contemporary visitors to Mocha will see little of the vibrant and populous city that was witnessed by those who frequented the port during its heyday, lasting from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth century (see Figure 4). Today's city has suffered a great deal of neglect, decline and decay, and its historic character is essentially illegible on the ground. In fact, most of the older quarters are emptied of inhabitants, who have moved to newer settlements on the town's perimeter.

When I first visited Mocha as a researcher in 1996, few historic houses remained. Of these, a small number can be situated historically, based not just on style and mode of construction, but also on supporting visual and textual documents.⁵ As a key example, Bayt al-Mahfadi, located close to the shoreline, was likely constructed in the nineteenth century. Its early date is suggested by a contract for sale, dated 1931, when the family who currently owns the house acquired it. They lived in it until 2016, when the house was damaged by shelling as a consequence of the escalating conflict in Yemen; they fled Mocha for Sanaa.⁶ Other notable historic houses appear in early photographs, such as those taken



Figure 4. Early twentieth-century view of Mocha. Photograph by Hermann Burchardt, 1909. Courtesy of the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

by the German traveller Hermann Burchardt, who visited Mocha in 1909 and stayed in the house of the marquis Gaetano Benzoni, who served as consul to Italy.⁷ This house – the present-day Idara building – is used by the administration of the city, although many of its doors and windows have been boarded up and its main entrance was diverted to the side (see Figure 5). Bayt Sidi Nunu was located in the northern sector of the city, which has long been deserted. This house was still intact in 1909, as pictured by Burchardt, although its entrance was already sealed with brick at that time (see Figure 6). In 1996, the last remnants of its crumbling façade finally collapsed.

In addition to Bayt al-Mahfadi, the Idara building and Bayt Sidi Nunu, numerous other houses in Mocha, which are now destroyed and therefore cannot be located, were captured in the photographs of Burchardt and those of the French sculptor Auguste Bartholdi, who visited Mocha in 1856. These images reveal a building tradition that is no longer maintained (see Figures 6 and 7). They also suggest that some of the earlier houses in Mocha may have been ornamented more elaborately than later ones, with a distinctive iconography in wood and a lively tradition of surface carving in stucco.⁸ As one example, Sultan Hasan, the rogue governor of Mocha who refused to submit tribute to the imam in Sanaa, built his towering palace on the city's main square in the early

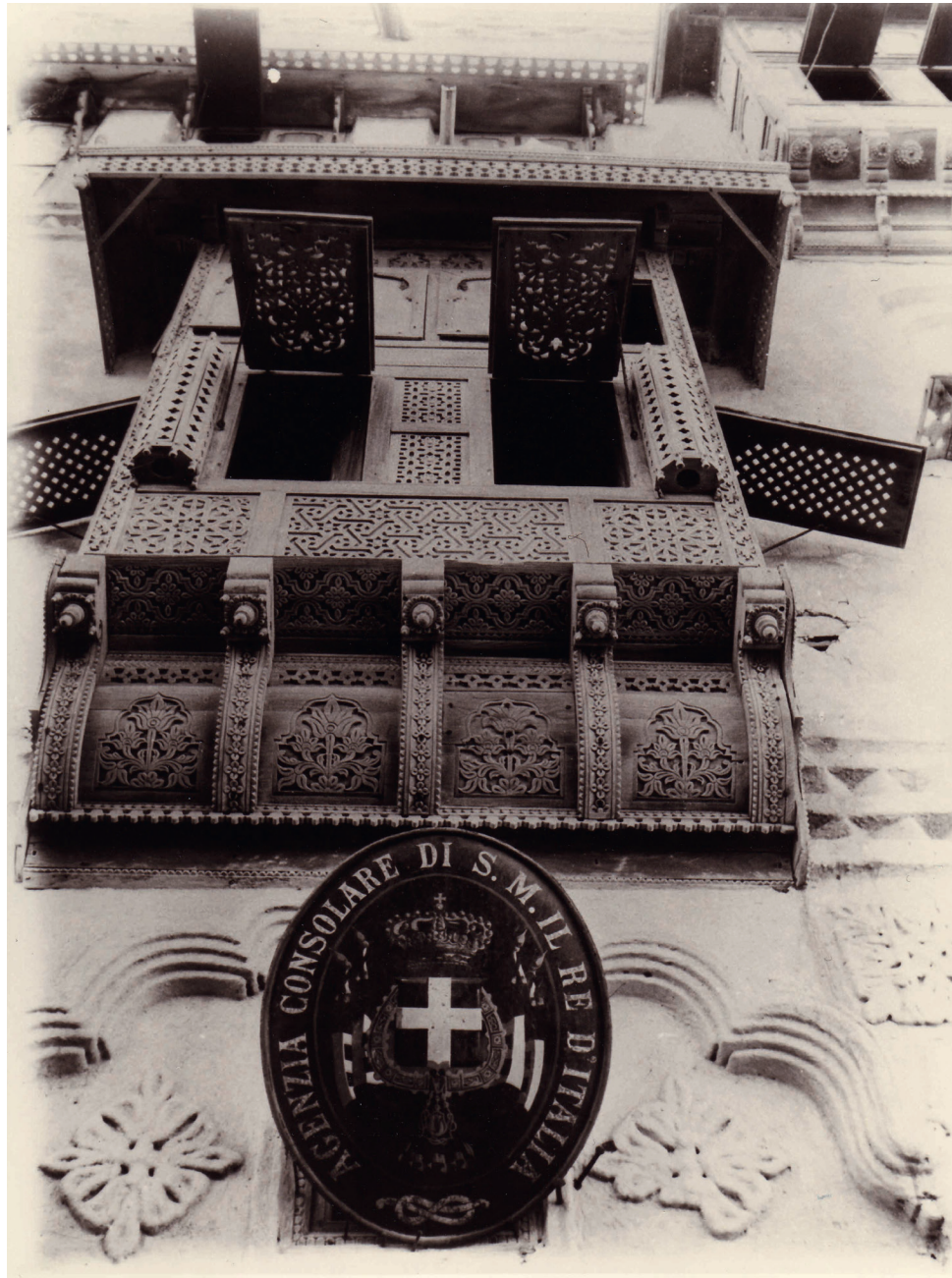


Figure 5. The *rawshan* (projecting oriel window with carved wooden screens) of the Idara Building, Mocha, built in the nineteenth century or earlier. Photograph by Hermann Burchardt, 1909. Courtesy of the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

nineteenth century (see Figure 8).⁹ By the end of the twentieth century no verifiable traces of the monumental palace remained.¹⁰

MOCHA'S HOUSES: INSIDE AND OUT

The extant examples discussed so far and accompanying photographs may be read in tandem in order to understand a tradition of durable building that was joined by less robust dwellings of reed and thatch. Amidst these more ephemeral settlements, Mocha's stone and brick houses would have appeared to be lofty, although they rarely exceeded two stories in height. While coral rock was commonly used as a building material in other Red Sea cities, in Mocha, basalt stone foundations were topped with upper courses of baked brick, all sealed under thick layers of lime plaster, which required regular maintenance.

The ground-floor windows were fairly large in size, but solidly guarded with metal bars to protect the goods stored within. The upper stories were pierced with small windows that were screened with slats of wood and shaded with overhanging awnings, some edged with borders of decorative fringe. Recessed arches, some scalloped, were carved upon the surfaces of the houses in low relief, often pierced with triple round oculi. Each façade possessed



Figure 6. Bayt Sidi Nunu, Mocha, constructed in the nineteenth century or earlier (now destroyed). Photograph by Hermann Burchardt, 1909. Courtesy of the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

at least one majestic projecting window, as illustrated in Figure 5. Around the Red Sea, these windows are referred to as *rawshan* (pl. *rawashin*), but they are more popularly called *mashrabiyyah* elsewhere in the Middle East. A *rawshan* was generally positioned above the main entrance to the house, although the largest houses displayed more than one on their primary façades. *Rawashin* were composed of smaller panels perforated in diverse patterns, some with small shutters that swung open and shut. A few included projecting compartments that may have been used to store water vessels, which would be conveniently cooled by the passing breeze.

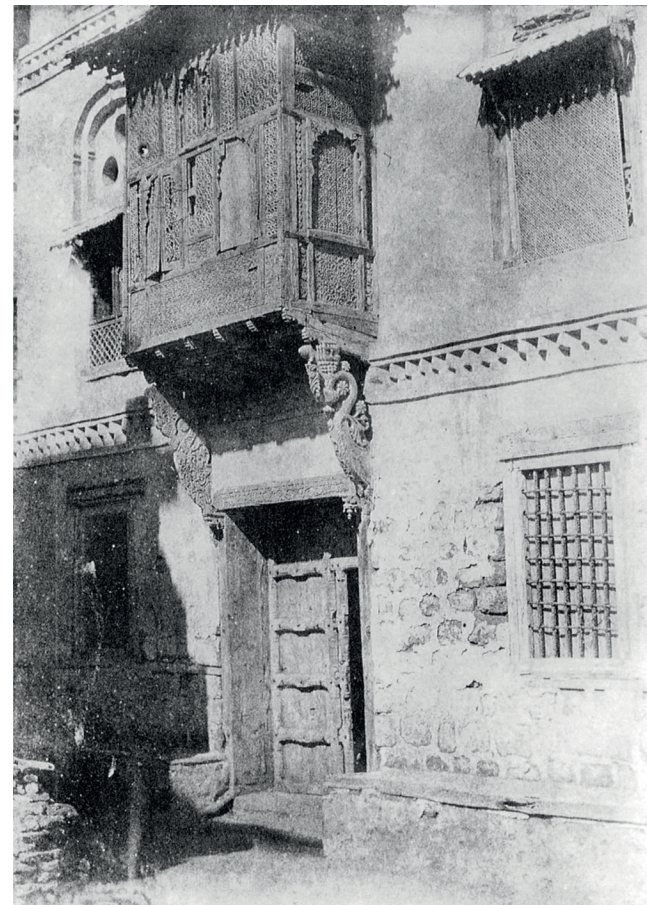


Figure 7. House in Mocha constructed in the nineteenth century or earlier (now destroyed). Photograph by August Bartholdi, 1856. Salted paper print. Musée Bartholdi, Colmar. Reproduction © C. Kempf.

Some *rawashin* were supported with elaborately carved bases or brackets.

Horizontal bands of sawtooth ornament and textured belts of diamonds stretched across the exterior elevation. A ramada structure of reed mats was erected on the flat rooftop to expand the living space and so that, during the hottest months of the year, family members could take advantage of the airiest part of the house. These buildings were constructed directly adjacent to each other, enclosing narrow streets that were shaded through the overhang of the *rawashin* and their awnings.

The accounts of early observers in Mocha confirm the historic continuity of many of these external features, although the majority of narrators had little interest in recording details about local architecture. One of the most extensive accounts was left by Louis de Grandpré, a private French merchant who visited the city in the late eighteenth century. Although his account is wholly subjective, peppered with remarks about the inconvenience of these houses and their lack of fine interior adornment, his references to Mocha's architecture are nevertheless useful. In fact,



Figure 8. Palace of Sultan Hasan, built in Mocha in the early nineteenth century (now destroyed). Photograph by Hermann Burchardt, 1909. Published in Eugen Mittwoch, *Aus dem Jemen: Hermann Burchardts Letzte Reise Durch Südarabien*, Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1926, plate XXII.

they align closely with what we know about the historic buildings that still stand and the photographic representations discussed above. Grandpré's account informs us that:

The houses are all built of brick, with extremely small openings for light, except for the blind on each story, which is an enclosed balcony, with apertures to look through. They resemble at a distance the balconies in Spain, and at first sight Mocha has very much the appearance of a Spanish town.¹¹

He continues by describing how the roofs were covered with mats and used frequently for sleeping during what he refers to as 'the violence of the heat'. Grandpré then tells us about the plan and interior organisation of the house, information that is quite valuable and particularly difficult to glean from our visual sources. With the claim that the same plan was generally replicated in most houses, he describes it as follows:

The staircase leads to a large anti-chamber, common to the whole floor, having the apartments round it. Instead of pavement or flooring, they have slight beams of palm-wood covered with straw, and over this lime... The hall in which visitors are received is covered with a carpeting of straw, and has a mattress laid round the sides, on which are a great quantity of cushions to sit or lie upon at pleasure, with small Persian carpets at the feet, when the intention is to be sumptuous. Above, all round the room, is one or more shelves loaded with porcelain, which is the luxury of the country.¹²

As described by Grandpré and evidenced by extant examples, the living spaces of Mocha's houses were located on the upper level, with the rooms arranged around a central light well, open to the sky. In Bayt al-Mahfadi and the Idara building, the ground level was relegated to service functions, including a warehouse for goods. Although most rooms on the upper floor were multifunctional, as is generally the case in Yemeni residences, one room was designated as the *diwan*, or reception room, and was equipped for providing hospitality. This highly decorated room often had built-in shelves to display fine objects, as noted by Grandpré above, and the *rawshan*, which would have made it the coolest room in the house.

ARCHITECTURAL CONNECTIONS AND CONTINUITIES

Although the projecting *rawshan* window is the most notable feature of Mocha's architecture (see Figure 9), it is also one that has been perennially seen as foreign. This tendency was already highlighted by Grandpré's comparison of this Red Sea port to towns in Spain. *Rawashin* are also found in the Red Sea cities of Jiddah (Saudi Arabia), Suakin (north-eastern Sudan) and Massawa (Eritrea), all of which share a number of architectural continuities with Mocha, al-Hudaydah and al-Luhayyah (see Figures 10 and 11). Yet, due to what I have referred to elsewhere as its 'indeterminate' but also 'sustained exoticization', many scholars have made efforts to trace straight lines of origin for the *rawshan*, with the interest of pinning down trajectories of architectural diffusion from one site to another. By doing so, they refuse to see the *rawshan* as a local Red Sea form.¹³ By contrast, I have underscored the futility of such exercises, by relating the Mocha (and wider Red Sea) *rawshan* to many architectural traditions found around the Indian Ocean and even the Mediterranean (as Grandpré suggested) rather than casting it as the heir of any single architectural source.

Nevertheless, certain examples, such as the evocative house featured in the photograph taken by Bartholdi (see Figure 7), suggest very specific connections rather than generic ones. That now-ruined house had a *rawshan* supported by two brackets, carved in the shape of birds with dramatic S-shaped necks. Another one of Bartholdi's photographs shows the same house as it would have been seen in profile, while walking down the street – a view that would have afforded the perfect vantage point for seeing the brackets in all of their decorative detail.¹⁴ Unlike the relatively generic form of the projecting window, these serpentine supports suggest a solid material connection to Gujarat, where similar forms were used to uphold cantilevered balconies on houses.

Although the Mocha house photographed by Bartholdi no longer stands, it provides clear evidence that architectural forms travelled fluidly from India to the Arabian Peninsula in previous centuries. Because the teak used for the house windows was imported from the east, directly from India or via India from Southeast Asia, its S-shaped brackets, too, may have been brought to Mocha from India already carved. It is also possible that artisans based in Mocha, perhaps of Indian origin, carved them from pieces

of imported unworked wood. In the mid-nineteenth century, the French Orientalist Prisse d'Avennes attested to the presence of Indian woodworkers in Mocha.¹⁵ This supports the second possibility, while also confirming the marketability of Indian designs in the Arabian Peninsula. Images like those left by Bartholdi are valuable precisely because they demonstrate such connections in a tangible way, whether through the movement of worked objects or that of the people who crafted them.



Figure 9. The main façade of Bayt al-Mujahib with a *rawshan* above the main door, Mocha.

With regard to these woodcarving traditions, one could go even further to signal the close connections between ships fashioned of Asian hardwood and houses decorated with the same material. In writing about the Red Sea port of Suakin in modern Sudan (another site with exemplary coastal architecture), Michael Mallinson has suggested that the projecting windows of that city may have been inspired from Indian models, brought by artisans who also worked in boatbuilding. He compares the prominent projecting windows with the carved sterns of western Indian Ocean ships, which were pierced by arched perforations and undergirded by sloping supports and brackets.¹⁶ This analogy is speculative but visually compelling and could be relevant to Mocha. It is also enticing because it suggests an actual mode of transmission for forms rather than simply looking at the material outcomes of these proposed relationships. The fundamental

relationship between coastal houses and wooden ships was also confirmed in the nearby city of Jiddah, where one of the most prominent houses in the city, Bayt al-Nasif, was constructed using wood salvaged from a shipwreck in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷

This chapter has provided sources, both visual and textual, in order to trace some of the key features of Mocha's houses, which represent a vanishing tradition. It has also suggested that Mocha's houses constituted a maritime architecture that gestured to many sites of connection across oceans and even onto the open seas. At a time of great cultural loss and uncertainty, it is crucial that scholars and conservators work to reconstruct and understand this coastal building tradition, which is particularly fragile and rapidly diminishing.



Figure 10. A street view in the old town of al-Hudaydah. Note the *rawshan* over the entrance to the house on the left.

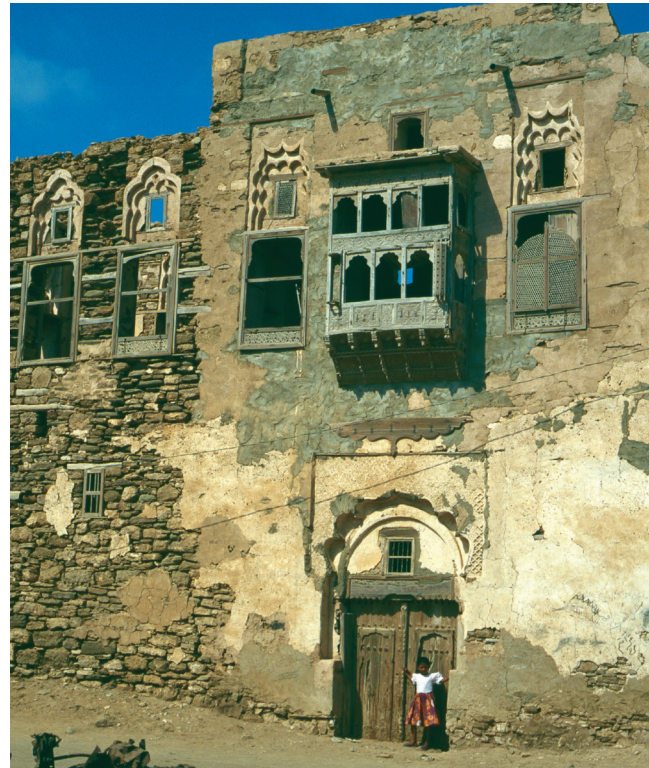


Figure 11. The dilapidated house of a merchant-trader with a finely carved *rawshan* over the front door, al-Luhayyah.

NOTES

1. On the state of decay of architecture along both sides of the Red Sea coast, see Um, N., 'Reflections on the Red Sea Style: Beyond the Surface of Coastal Architecture', *Northeast African Studies* 12:1, 2012, pp. 243–271.
2. For more on the concept of 'maritimity' in the Indian Ocean context, see the article by the archaeologists Fleischer, J., Lane, P., LaViolette, A., Horton, M., Pollard, E., Quintana Morales, E., Vernet, T., Christie, A., Wynne-Jones, S., 'When did the Swahili Become Maritime?', *American Anthropologist* 117:1, 2015, pp. 100–115.
3. Musawi al-Makki, 'A. al-', ed. M.M. Khurasan, *Nuzhat al-jalis wa munyat al-adib al-anis*, 2 volumes, Al-Najaf, Iraq: al-Matba'a al-Haydariyyah, 1967, vol. 2, p. 261.
4. Italian bombardment destroyed the Great Mosque in 1911. The wooden pillars from the building were then used for a modern extension to the Mosque of al-Shadhili.
5. In addition to Bayt al-Mahfadi, other examples of historic houses in Mocha include Bayt al-Mi'yad and the two houses near the shore owned by the al-Muhajib family, but these houses lack any supporting documentation for their history.
6. As conveyed to me in an email message from Munir al-Mahfadi, dated 7 July, 2016.
7. Bandits murdered both Burchardt and Benzoni soon after they left Mocha in December 1909. It is unclear whether they were targeted directly or the victims of a random act. Contemporary residents of Mocha refer to Benzoni as a 'coffee merchant'.
8. Another of Bartholdi's photographs shows a house with stars and rosettes carved in the arched recess above the door. These decorative elements appear less frequently in later buildings; see Hueber, R., Schmitt, J.-M., *Au Yémen en 1856: Photographies et dessins d'Auguste Bartholdi*, Colmar, France, 1994, p. 86.
9. Um, N., *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port*, Seattle, WA, 2009, pp. 186–7.
10. In 2000, I showed Burchardt's photograph of the building to 'Adil 'Abd al-Wahhab, grandson of the city's local historian and my key ambassador to Mocha. He then showed me some ruins which he believed to have been of the same structure.
11. Grandpré, L. de, *A. Voyage in the Indian Ocean and to Bengal, Undertaken in the Years 1789 and 1790: containing an account of the Sechelles Islands and Trincomale... To which is added, A Voyage in the Red Sea; including a description of Mocha and of the trade of the Arabs of Yemen*, Boston, 1803 [1801], p. 230.
12. Grandpré, L. de, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and to Bengal*, p. 231.
13. Um, N., 'Reflections on the Red Sea Style: Beyond the Surface of Coastal Architecture', pp. 260–264.
14. Hueber, R., Schmitt, J.-M., *Au Yémen en 1856: Photographies et dessins d'Auguste Bartholdi*, Colmar, France, 1994, p. 83.
15. Prisse d'Avennes, É., *L'art arabe d'après les monuments de Kaire: depuis le VIIe siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe*, 4 volumes, Paris, 1877, p. 186.
16. Mallinson, M., 'Suakin: Paradigm of a Port', in D.A. Agius, J.P. Cooper, A. Trakadas and C. Zazzaro, eds, *Navigated Spaces, Connected Places: Proceedings of Red Sea Project V, held at the University of Exeter, 16–19 September 2010*, Oxford, p. 168.
17. King, G., *The Traditional Architecture of Saudi Arabia*, London, 1988, p. 47.